DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 237 964 CS 007 452

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TITLE Field-Experience Reading Interns Profile the Effective/Ineffective University Supervisor.
PUB DATE Oct 83
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College Reading Association (27th, Atlanta, GA, October 20-22, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Research; Field Experience Programs; Higher Education; Methods Courses; Reading Instruction; Reading Teachers; *Student Attitudes; *Student Teacher Supervisors; *Student Teaching; Supervisor Qualifications; *Teacher Effectiveness; Teacher Evaluation; *Teacher Role; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

A study examined students' perceptions of what it is that distinguishes effective from ineffective university supervision. Subjects were 83 early childhood education majors enrolled in two field-based reading methods courses offering six weeks of university instruction and four weeks of classroom experience. Students responded to questionnaires that elicited their attitudes toward the observation/evaluation process and the strengths and weaknesses of the university supervising teacher. Results showed that, contrary to what some of the literature suggests, the university supervisor is still perceived by students as playing a vital role in the students' professional development. The students' perceptions of what contributed to a supervisor's effectiveness clustered largely in three areas: attitudes, handling of the observation process, and the manner in which feedback was given. Finally, students' concerns did not concentrate on the strengths and weaknesses of a particular supervisor, but tended to generalize to the supervisory process itself. (Copies of the questionnaires, and profiles of the effective and ineffective university supervisors are appended.) (FL)

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FIELD-EXPERIENCE READING INTERNS PROFILE THE EFFECTIVE/INEFFECTIVE UNIVERSITY SUPERVISOR

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October 27, 1983

CS007452

Abstract

A review of the teacher education literature suggests that with one exception, the area of early field-based education is still virtually unstudied. In the face of financial difficulties and greater public awareness of the education arena, more information concerning the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of various aspects of field-based education programs is needed. This study explores the role of the university supervisor, a role that has come under sharp criticism of late, in early field-based reading education programs. It examines reading interns' perceptions of what it is that distinguishes effective from ineffective university supervision during two required field-based reading methods courses.

Subjects were Early Childhood Education majors drawn from students enrolled in several sections of two field-based reading methods courses. The materials used were two questionnaires composed of open-ended questions designed specifically to tap students' perception of the university supervisor's role in their field experiences.

Responses obtained from 83 completed questionnaires fell into three areas: the attitude of the university supervisor, the supervisor's handling of the observation process, and the manner of feedback utilized by the supervisor.

Field-Experience Reading Interns Profile the Effective/Ineffective University Supervisor

Many colleges and universities throughout the United States are deeply involved in early field-based teacher education programs at the undergraduate level. Belief in the utility of these pre-student teaching experiences has won nearly universal acceptance. Two years ago, for example, Ishler and Kay (1981) found that more than 95 percent of the teacher education institutions in the United States reported having had early field experience programs in place for at least five years.

Yet a review of the teacher education literature suggests that with one notable exception, the area of early field-based education is still virtually unstudied. The one exception is a recently completed national survey by the Association of Teacher Educators (ATE). The ATE Commission on Exploratory Field Experiences found that only 27 percent of the 240 institutions responding to the questionnaire reported conducting any research on the effectiveness of their programs, and of that number, only 10 indicated that results of their research were available (Ishler & Kay, 1981).

Lack of documented evidence to support early field-based teacher education programs is particularly dangerous at this time. As financial difficulties beset increasingly more colleges of education across the United States and as public awareness of what's wrong with American schooling increases (see A Nation at Risk, 1983), it is imperative that we have information available on the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of various aspects of field-based education programs.

One such aspect--the role of the university supervisor--has come under sharp criticism (Andrews, 1976; Kilgore, 1979), with some teacher educators

(e.g. Bowman, 1979) suggesting that specially trained classroom teachers should replace university personnel in the supervision of interns. Nowhere, however, in the literature on early field experiences is there any evidence of how students view university supervision. Yet, knowledge of what interns value least and most in the supervisory process would seem to be essential information for those responsible for making decisions about the future of early field-based education programs.

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to examine students' perceptions of what it is that distinguishes effective from ineffective university supervision during two required field-based reading methods courses. Assuming that early field experiences "encourage the assimilation of the aspiring teaching candidate into the social milieu of the classroom not as a critical observer, but as an uncritical recorder and emulator of behaviors and practices of the classroom teacher" (Denton, 1983, p. 3), it is imperative that the university supervisor be viewed by interns as a significant other, one whose judgments and advice can be trusted. A supervisor who is perceived as ineffective jeopardizes the professional development of interns by relegating them to the role of "teaching technicians" as opposed to "students of teaching" (see Dewey, 1904, for a discussion of these roles).

Method

The subjects in this study were 83 Early Childhood Education majors drawn from students enrolled in several sections of two field-based reading methods courses taught at a southeastern university. The format of these courses was such that the first six weeks of the quarter were spent in university-based instruction; the last four weeks were spent in

the assigned field-based classroom. The study tapped student responses over three quarters. Totally, responses were received from 54 subjects enrolled in the first field-based course and from 29 enrolled in the second course. The subjects were all female and in their senior year of undergraduate work.

The materials used were two questionnaires (Figure 1), one for each course, composed of open-ended questions designed specifically to tap students' perceptions of the university supervisor's role in their field experiences. In particular, one question asked for the strengths and/or weaknesses of the observation/evaluation process, and another asked about the strengths and/or weaknesses of the university supervisor. Additionally, the questionnaire for the second course asked for a comparison with the previous course's field experience.

Insert Figure 1 about here

During the period between the subjects' last day in the field and the course's final examination, the subjects were asked to complete the questionnaire. They were assured that their responses would in no way affect their course grade. A graduate assistant collected the responses and tabulated them; the university supervisor did not see the responses until after final grades for the course had been submitted.

Results

The responses to the initial course questionnaire outlined, with a fair degree of detail, the facets of both effective and ineffective supervision on the part of the university contact person. The second course's

follow-up survey reinforced the results of the first. The students' comments concerning their field experience supervision appeared to fall naturally into three areas: the attitude of the university supervisor, the supervisor's handling of the observation process, and the manner of feedback utilized by the supervisor.

Attitude of Supervisor

The attitude that the university supervisor exhibited toward both the student intern and the field experience process itself was of primary concern to the subjects. A positive, supportive attitude on the part of the supervisor served to build within the intern a stronger confidence toward her classroom experience. "I appreciated the way the supervisor was always supportive and positive toward the things I did. She always put me at ease." "I appreciated her positive attitude.... She was very supportive and her presence helped build confidence...." Additionally, the interns felt more comfortable with a supervisor displaying a warm, non-threatening attitude. "The supervisor was very warm and friendly which helped me not to get too nervous." The interns were glad to be at a distance from a supervisor playing the role of judge, and they looked for positive support, not judgment. "I felt that she was there to help me, not hurt me." "I knew that she was there to help me, not to judge me; she was in my corner...." "The supervisor was supportive and positive toward the things I did. She always put me at ease. She did not get too close or make me feel threatened." On the other hand, ineffective supervision came when the university person was cold and unapproachable. "The supervisor wasn't a very personable person. I didn't really feel comfortable talking to her."

Being given clear expectations of their part in the field experience was important to the interns surveyed. "You knew what you were supposed to do for an observation." "We knew exactly what was expected of us." A written guide delineating those expectations appeared to be the clearest manner of conveying such to the interns. "The list made it possible for us to know exactly what was expected of us." The ineffective supervisor gave the appearance of disorganization and left the interns floundering, unclear as to what was expected of them.

The effective supervisor gave interns the impression of being available when needed, to answer questions, give reassurances, and provide assistance with problems. Coupled with this factor was the openness of the supervisor to the interns' concerns and the help given in building their self-concepts in relation to the teaching process. "I appreciated the way the supervisors respected us as student teachers learning." "Each supervisor took into consideration other things that happened in the class that caused disruption. I think both realized that we are new teachers needing encouragement, reinforcement, and ideas."

The interns were appreciative of a supervisor's honest appraisal of their teaching. "The supervisor was always fair in evaluating my lesson and offered much positive, helpful feedback." They also were very sensitive about fairness and exhibited a defensive attitude about being graded on situations beyond their control. "I appreciated the way she took into consideration different situations. Some students got ideal classrooms and were able to do a lot with their group. Others were less fortunate and had to do the best they could." Finally, the interns looked for enthusiasm on the part of the supervisor, enthusiasm for the teaching/learning process and for their potential as leaders in that process. "The

supervisor always gave me that 'umph' that I needed!" "I appreciated the way the supervisor always seemed to care about the success or failure of my experience."

The Observation Process

The second area of concern was that of the formal observation process itself and the university supervisor's handling of it. Of paramount importance to the interns was a non-interfering role on the part of the university supervisor. They were adamant about being allowed to teach the designated lesson without interference from the supervisor. "The supervisor never interrupted me while teaching, which is important." "The supervisors did not interrupt my lessons to correct me or to take over. That action would decrease my image of authority in the students, and I appreciated the fact they withheld comments until my students had left." Though they did not mind the supervisor's playing a helping role during a period of individualization in the lesson, they did not appreciate the university person's stepping in and taking over the teaching of their lesson. "I did not appreciate the way the supervisor, during one observation, started teaching the kids after I had finished." "Sometimes the supervisor would interrupt the lesson to aid or correct the material; this was embarrassing." "I liked the way she didn't interfere with the lesson while I was teaching. I did appreciate her helping me with the children while they were working independently." For the most part, the interns wanted the supervisor to "remain in the background" and be as invisible as possible. "The supervisor was very inconspicuous. She came in very quietly and did not interrupt the lesson in any way." They were very critical of supervisors who behaved in a distracting manner, either by reprimanding

tangential pupils or by engaging in conversation with other supervisors during the lesson. "The disruption was the continuous jittering of the supervisor...." "During a lesson in which I was being observed by two professors, the supervisors talked among themselves, which worried me because I was concerned about what they were talking about."

The reinforcement factor was important to these interns. They wanted some form of very immediate support and commentary following the lesson. "I would like the supervisor to at least tell me if I did OK or not right after the observation instead of making me wait until the conference to find out." "After she had filled out the evaluation form, she left it where she was sitting and left quietly. I think this is an excellent way to do the evaluation." Several indicated that simply a smile or an OK sign would suffice. "If a conference was not possible at the time, the supervisor always left the room with a smile.... This reinforcement at least held me for the moment until I could sit down and talk to her at length." Others preferred some tangible form of immediate feedback, either a narrative or a checklist evaluation format. "The immediate feedback put me at ease so I could continue teaching the remaining time without having a nervous breakdown!"

The interns in this study were quite aware of time. They praised supervisors who scheduled observations, were on time for the observations, and stayed to observe a complete lesson. "I appreciated the way the supervisors were so prompt to the observations and attentive." On the other hand, they felt cheated by supervisors who were careless about scheduling observations, were late for observations, and/or made a practice of cutting the observation short. "Some supervisors did not come at the time scheduled. Some just 'showed up' and the lesson was already completed

because of rescheduling within the classroom." "Not being able to observe the entire lesson was a weakness." "It is very discouraging to me and to other students when we are graded so heavily on 15-20 minutes of observation time." "I do not feel the supervisor was in the classroom long enough to get a full picture of the reading lesson." Lastly, these interns stated an appreciation of supervisors who exhibited professional behavior in dealing with them, both in the field classroom and in the university setting. "I appreciated the confidentiality and professionalism of the supervisor during my field experience."

Feedback

The feedback process associated with the field observations generally involved bringing the university supervisor and the intern into a conference situation. Some university personnel chose to conduct their conferences at the field site, either immediately after the observation or within a couple of hours of the observation; others conferred at the field site, but at a time several days removed from the observation itself. A couple of the supervisors had asked the interns to meet with them at their university offices for the conferences.

Those responses which were favorable to the supervisors' handling of the feedback portion of the field experience referred most often to the content of the feedback conference. The interns valued most highly the suggestions made by the supervisor concerning the observed teaching situation and/or extensions of the lesson taught. "The supervisor helped me out when I got in situations I did not know how to handle." Thoroughness, on the part of the supervisor, in critiquing the total teaching situation, was appreciated. "The process was done with much thought, and the evaluation was clear and detailed." Also of great importance to these interns

was the tone of the conference; they sought positive, constructive commentary about their work. "My supervisor was most helpful and very supportive and encouraging, which made all the difference in the world as to how I taught." While some indicated that they wanted to hear primarily about their own strengths, most sought out information about their weaknesses as well. "The feedback was very helpful because so many details were given, concerning my lesson and its strengths and weaknesses." "The supervisor's feedback was always stated positively. If there was something I was to improve she would tell me honestly, and then back it up with some suggestions. I never felt like an incompetent fool afterwards." Though the form of the conference was not mentioned as often as its content and tone, several of the interns were quite vocal about its format. While they found the written evaluation to be helpful in the very immediate mode following the observation of their teaching, they preferred an oral conference with the university supervisor. "I could have been given a piece of paper with the lesson evaluation, but it wouldn't have been as clear or as 'important' to me without the conference." Several appreciated the conferences held at the university office. "When I went to your office there were no disturbances or anything going on around that would only keep me half attentive. I felt you had the time to talk to me. I didn't feel rushed...." "I appreciated having the office appointment later in the afternoon. It gave me time to reflect on the lesson and also let me talk more with the supervisor about suggestions and/or alternatives. I benefitted from this time the most."

When referring to the ineffective handling of the feedback process, the interns were initially quick to mention the supervisor's tone. Feedback of this nature was more often negative than positive. "Though my

lessons were done well (B+), the supervisors gave more negative feedback than positive. This was discouraging." The ineffective supervisor gave the impression of being too busy to talk at any length with the intern. "I was disappointed in the way she handled discussion times following observations. Many times I wanted to speak to the observer but found her busy." Of secondary importance in this respect was the timing of the feedback conference. When the conference was held beyond the day of the observation itself, the impact of such conferring was considered minimal. Of concern to several of the interns was the conference that contained few if any suggestions for improvement in their teaching. Bothersome too were grades seemingly based on the performance of the pupils during the observed lesson rather than upon the preparation and attempts of the intern. "The supervisor graded more on student behavior than on intern performance. She didn't look at the hard work, the variety of visuals, and the lesson itself, but mostly on student reaction." "I do not think we should get penalized for classroom problems that are beyond our control."

Insert Figures 2 and 3 about here

Discussion

Although limited by the descriptive nature of the study, one is able to make some tentative statements about early field experience students' perceptions of university supervision, to the extent, at least, that these perceptions are held by interns enrolled in two reading methods courses at a southeastern university. First, it appears that contrary to what some of the literature suggests, the university supervisor is still perceived as playing a vital role in preservice teachers' professional

development. Interns' articulated perceptions of what contributes to a supervisor's effectiveness and/or ineffectiveness clustered largely in three areas: the supervisor's attitude, his or her handling of the observation process (i.e., the mechanics of observing), and the manner in which feedback was given.

Second, despite the variance in responses that would be expected as a result of surveying students taught by different supervisors responsible for the reading methods courses, patterns of perceptions across course sections were detectable. Students' concerns did not concentrate on the strengths and/or weaknesses of a particular supervisor but tended to generalize to the supervisory process itself.

Third, the information obtained by surveying early field experience students' perceptions of university supervisors and the supervisory process provided the data base from which to construct a more refined questionnaire. It will be used to study changes in interns' perceptions of supervisors as they move from early field-based courses through student teaching.

Finally, the information obtained proved valuable to the supervisors involved in the present study as they prepared for subsequent evaluations in the field. In view of this fact, supervisors from other colleges and universities who are responsible for evaluating students in field-based components of reading methods courses may find the process a useful one. When a relatively simple questionnaire is formulated that encourages both open-ended and anonymous responses, supervisors can expect to gain considerable insight into their own strengths and deficits. Only through opening lines of communication between the university supervisor and the

teaching intern can we expect to have the kind of influence over pre-service teachers' professional development that is both desirable and necessary. To abdicate this responsibility is to risk educating interns as "teaching technicians" rather than as "students of teaching."

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Figure 1

QUESTIONNAIRE
INITIAL READING METHODS COURSE

1. What were the strengths and/or weaknesses of the observation/evaluation process?
2. What were the strengths and/or weaknesses of the university supervisor, especially concerning the manner of the observations, the number of observations, and the helpfulness (or lack of it) of the feedback?
3. What did you appreciate or not appreciate about the way the university supervisor handled your field experience?
4. Note any additional thoughts you have concerning your field experience, especially those related to the university supervisor.

QUESTIONNAIRE
SECOND READING METHODS COURSE

1. Did you perceive the observation/evaluation process to be different this quarter from last? If so, how?
2. Compare this quarter with last quarter's supervision. Consider, for example the amount and kind of support received from your university supervisor.
3. Note any additional thoughts you have concerning your field experience.

Figure 2

PROFILE OF THE EFFECTIVE UNIVERSITY SUPERVISOR

Rank

ATTITUDE

1. Supportive/positive
2. Non-threatening/warm/helpful
3. Presents clear expectations
4. Available when needed
5. Honest/fair
6. Enthusiastic/open to students' concerns

OBSERVATION

1. Non-interfering
   --remains "in background"
   --non-distracting
2. Gives immediate reinforcement
   --smile/OK sign
   --written/checklist evaluation
3. Conscientious about time
   --schedules observations
   --on time for observations
   --observes complete lesson
4. Models professional role

Figure 2 (continued)

FEEDBACK

1. Content

   --useful suggestions for class situation/lesson extension

   --thorough

2. Tone

   --strengths/weaknesses presented in positive, constructive manner

   --indication given that there is time to talk

3. Timing

   --some immediate/more detailed same day

4. Format

   --oral better than written

   --undisturbed conference

Figure 3

PROFILE OF THE INEFFECTIVE UNIVERSITY SUPERVISOR

	Rank	
ATTITUDE	1.	Leaves unclear expectations
	2.	Not personable
	3.	Not comfortable to talk with
OBSERVATION	1.	Interferes with lesson being taught
	2.	Careless about time
		--cuts observation short
		--late for observation
	3.	Engages in distracting behavior during observation
FEEDBACK	1.	Tone
		--more negative than positive
		--gives impression of being too busy to talk with intern
	2.	Timing
		--too long after observation
	3.	Content
		--too few suggestions for improvement
		--graded on performance of pupils, not intern